

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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P R 071919Z DEC 77
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS PRIORITY
SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9796
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 TEL AVIV 10324

EXDIS

BRUSSELS FOR USDEL SEC

E.O.11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, PINR, IS
SUBJ: POSSIBLE SUCCESSORS TO BEGIN

REF: (A) TEL AVIV 8840, (B) TEL AVIV 8875

1. SUMMARY: PRIME MINISTER BEGIN'S SUDDEN WELL-PUBLICIZED STOMACH UPSET YESTERDAY IN LONDON REMINDED ISRAELIS ONCE AGAIN THAT THEY ARE LED BY A 64 YEAR OLD MAN WITH A SERIOUS HEART PROBLEM. MACABRE AS THE EXERCISE MAY SEEM, IN SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES WE BELIEVE IT PRUDENT TO REVIEW THE BIDDING CONCERNING POTENTIAL SUCCESSORS. AT PRESENT, WE SEE WEIZMAN AND YADIN AS THE MOST LIKELY CANDIDATES, WITH WEIZMAN CLEARLY HOLDING A COMMANDING LEAD. DAYAN, ARENS, AND POSSIBLY EHRLICH HAVE AN OUTSIDE CHANCE, AND SHARON HAS NONE.

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THIS LISTING COULD, OF COURSE, CHANGE IN LIGHT OF FUTURE EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL DEVELOPMENTS. END SUMMARY.

2. THE PRIME MINISTER'S GASTROINTESTINAL UPSET IN LONDON YESTERDAY REACTIVATED THE ISRAELI RUMOR MILL REGARDING THE REAL CONDITION OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S HEALTH. IT IS GENERALLY KNOWN THAT WHILE HE HAS A SERIOUS HEART CONDITION, HE IS

FOLLOWING HIS DOCTOR'S ADVICE, RESTING EACH DAY, AND OTHERWISE TAKING CARE OF HIMSELF. CLAIMS THAT BEGIN'S DOCTORS HAVE RECOMMENDED OPEN HEART SURGERY ARE VIGOROUSLY DENIED BY HIS STAFF, BUT WE HAVE REASON TO BELIEVE THEY ARE TRUE. WE DO NOT KNOW ALL THE FACTS, BUT WE DO KNOW THE PRIME MINISTER IN RECENT WEEKS HAS CUT BACK HIS HEAVY WORK SCHEDULE ON DOCTOR'S ORDERS.

3. WE TEND TO DISCOUNT THE RUMOR THAT HE WILL RESIGN AS PRIME MINISTER AND CAMPAIGN FOR ELECTION AS PRESIDENT (REFTEL A). ALTHOUGH BEGIN HIMSELF HAD SAID WHEN HIS GOVERNMENT WAS ESTABLISHED THAT HE WOULD TAKE STEPS TO UPGRADE THE PRESIDENCY, WE SEE LITTLE EVIDENCE THAT THIS HAS OCCURRED AND THE OFFICE REMAINS PRIMARILY A CEREMONIAL ONE, ALTHOUGH KATZIR IS PRESENTLY CARRYING OUT A MEANINGFUL VISIT TO CENTRAL AMERICA. IT IS NOT IN BEGIN'S CHARACTER TO SEEK A POSITION WHICH IS OUT OF THE MAINSTREAM OF POLITICAL ACTIVITY.

4. IF THE PROBLEM AROSE, THE TERMS OF THE COALITION AGREEMENT SPECIFY THAT DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER YADIN WOULD SERVE AS ACTING PRIME MINISTER UNTIL A NEW INCUMBENT WERE CHOSEN. THE PROCESS BY WHICH THE NEW PRIME MINISTER WOULD BE NAMED WOULD PROBABLY NOT INVOLVE A GENERAL ELECTION BUT WOULD BE A DEAL WORKED OUT BY THE PARTIES COMPOSING THE COALITION. THERE ARE, OF COURSE,

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NO ANNOUNCED CANDIDATES FOR BEGIN'S SUCCESSOR BUT WE BELIEVE IT IS TIME TO CONSIDER WHO MIGHT REALISTICALLY BE THE NEXT PRIME MINISTER.

5. THE LIST OF POSSIBLE CANDIDATES MUST BE HEADED BY MINISTER OF DEFENSE EZER WEIZMAN. ANOTHER POSSIBLE CONTENDER WOULD BE YADIN HIMSELF. FOREIGN MINISTER MOSHE DAYAN AND THE CHAIRMAN OF THE KNESSET FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY COMMITTEE, MOSHE ARENS, COULD BE CONSIDERED TO HAVE AN OUTSIDE CHANCE. WE SEE LITTLE POSSIBILITY FOR FINANCE MINISTER EHRLICH AND NONE FOR AGRICULTURE MINISTER SHARON.

6. WEIZMAN, SEVERAL WEEKS AGO, WEIZMAN TOLD THE AMBASSADOR THAT HE HOPES THE SITUATION WILL NOT ARISE, THAT HE WANTS AND INTENDS TO BE THE MINISTER OF DEFENSE FOR FOUR YEARS AND THAT HE IS NOT AT ALL ANXIOUS TO BE BEGIN'S SUCCESSOR AS PRIME MINISTER. NEVERTHELESS, HE SAYS HE IS READY TO SERVE AS PRIME MINISTER IF NECESSARY, AND THAT WHILE HE IS BY NO MEANS CONFIDENT HE WOULD GET THE JOB, HE IS CONFIDENT THAT HE COULD HANDLE IT.

7. WEIZMAN TELLS US THAT BEGIN HAD MISTRUSTED HIM FOR

A LONG TIME AFTER HE (WEIZMAN) LEFT THE PARTY A FEW YEARS AGO. WEIZMAN FEELS THAT HE IS JUST NOW OVERCOMING THIS SUSPICION OF HIMSELF AND CREDITS THE FACT THAT "I WON THE ELECTION FOR HIM" AS A MAJOR FACTOR IN REGAINING BEGIN'S TRUST. Nevertheless, HE REMAINS UNSSURE JUST HOW FULLY ACCEPTED HE IS BY THE PRIME MINISTER AND APPEARS UNCERTAIN THAT BEGIN WOULD EVER ENDORSE HIM AS HIS SUCCESSOR. WEIZMAN IS THE RANKING MAN AFTER BEGIN IN HERUT, WHICH AS THE LIKUD'S LARGEST PARTY WOULD EXPECT TO PROVIDE THE PRIME MINISTER. HE IS, HOWEVER, NOT ACCEPTED BY ALL "HERUTNIKS" AS BEGIN'S AUTOMATIC SUCCESSOR.

8. YADIN. IF BEGIN WERE TO BE PARTIALLY INCAPACITATED AND UNABLE TO CARRY OUT HIS DUTIES, BUT STILL ALIVE,
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YADIN WOULD BE DESIGNATED ACTING PRIME MINISTER. HE WOULD ALSO LIKELY SERVE AS INTERIM PRIME MINISTER IF BEGIN SUDDENLY LEFT THE SCENE. MOST OBSERVERS BELIEVE THAT THIS IS PROBABLY THE ONLY WAY THAT YADIN WOULD EVER SERVE AS ISRAEL'S PRIME MINISTER, ALTHOUGH HE MIGHT HAVE AN OUTSIDE CHANCE AS A COMPROMISE CANDIDATE IF A CONTEST TO CHOOSE BEGIN'S SUCCESSOR WERE DEADLOCKED. HIS BASIC HANDICAP IS THAT THE LIKUD, AS THE LARGEST PARTY IN THE COALITION, WOULD ACCEPT AN OUTSIDER AS PRIME MINISTER ONLY AS A LAST RESORT. WE BELIEVE THAT YADIN HAS ACCEPTED THIS AS A FACT OF POLITICAL LIFE AND NO LONGER HAS ANY ILLUSIONS THAT HE WILL SERVE AS APOPULARLY CHOSEN PRIME MINISTER. (INCIDENTALLY, WE BELIEVE THAT UNDER YADIN AS PRIME MINISTER OR EVEN ACTING PRIME MINISTER, THE CHANCES ARE GREATEST THAT THE LABOR PARTY COULD BE INDUCED TO ENTER A NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT; BEGIN IS NOT LIKELY TO OFFER THEM TERMS THAT WOULD BE ACCEPTED AND LABOR IS

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MUCH MORE LIKELY TO ACCEPT YADIN'S LEADERSHIP THAN BEGIN'S. A GRAND COALITION INCLUDING THE LABOR PARTY IS NOT TO BE EXCLUDED IN THE CHAOTIC POLITICAL CONDITION THAT COULD FOLLOW BEGIN'S SUDDEN DEATH.)

9. DAYAN. ALTHOUGH FEW POLITICAL OBSERVERS GIVE DAYAN MUCH CHANCE TO BECOME PRIME MINISTER, WE DO NOT RULE HIM OUT AS A LONG SHOT. SHOULD THE ISRAELIS FIND THE RIGHT FORMULA TO A MIDDLE EAST PEACE ACCORD -- OR EVEN SUCCEED IN NEGOTIATING A PEACE AGREEMENT WITH THE EGYPTIANS -- WE WOULD GUESS DAYAN'S NATIONAL STANDING WOULD AGAIN SOAR, MEANWHILE, AT PRESENT ASIDE FROM THE SMALL LA'AM PARTY, HE HAS NO PARTY BACKING AND MANY ISRAELIS CONTINUE TO HOLD HIM RESPONSIBLE FOR THE YOM KIPPUR WAR. HE REMAINS A VERY CONTROVERSIAL FIGURE IN ISRAEL. WEIZMAN HAS SAID TO US THAT HE COULD SERVE UNDER DAYAN AS A PRIME MINISTER BUT HAS REMARKED THAT IT WOULD BE VERY DIFFICULT FOR BOTH OF THEM IF DAYAN WERE TO SERVE UNDER WEIZMAN (BECAUSE IN THEIR PREVIOUS MILITARY RELATIONSHIP DAYAN HAS ALWAYS BEEN SENIOR). INTERESTINGLY, DAYAN HAS SAID FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION THAT HE WOULD BE HAPPY TO SERVE IN A WEIZMAN CABINET.

10. SHARON. WE SEE NO POSSIBILITY AT ALL THAT SHARON WOULD EVER BE SELECTED AS PRIME MINISTER. HE SEES HIMSELF AS A FARMER AND A SOLDIER. HIS SERVICE IN THE BEGIN CABINET HAS BEEN A SOBERING EXPERIENCE FOR HIM AND WE BELIEVE THAT HIS WINGS WERE SEVERELY (ALTHOUGH NOT COMPLETELY) CLIPPED WHEN THE PRIME MINISTER AT THE END OF THE SUMMER SQUELCHED HIS VIEWS AND LIMITED HIS ACTIONS IN THE AREA OF SETTLEMENTS.

11. EHRLICH. FINANCE MINISTER EHRLICH IS SELDOM MENTIONED AS A SERIOUS CANDIDATE FOR PRIME MINISTER, ALTHOUGH HE IS WELL REGARDED AS THE LEADER OF THE LIBERAL PARTY. HE IS A GOOD ECONOMIST, A GOOD PARTY MAN, BUT HE IS NOT A LEADER AND REPORTEDLY HAS NO AMB-

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ITION FOR HIGHER OFFICE. AN ADDITIONAL DISQUALIFICATION IN THIS COUNTRY IS THAT HE DOES NOT SPEAK ADEQUATE ENGLISH.

12. ARENS, WELL REGARDED AND AIDED BY HIS PRESENT POST AS CHAIRMAN OF THE KNESSET FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND SECURITY COMMITTEE, ARENS HAS TO BE CONSIDERED AS A DARK HORSE ALTHOUGH HE IS NOT ON ANYBODY'S LIST OF ACTIVE CANDIDATES. WE BELIEVE HE SHOULD NOT BE OVERLOOKED AND THAT HIS CANDIDACY WOULD BECOME LIKELY IF BEGIN CASTS ABOUT FOR SOMEONE WHO SHARES HIS POLITICAL THINKING AND DOES NOT WISH TO TURN TO WEIZMAN (SEE TEL AVIV 8305).

1.3 OBVIOUSLY, THINGS COULD CHANGE. FOR EXAMPLE, WEIZMAN COULD SLIP IN THIS LISTING IF LEBANON, FOR WHICH HE IS RESPONSIBLE WITHIN THE CABINET, WERE TO TAKE A TURN FOR THE WORSE. YADIN COULD GAIN IF HE SERVES FOR A TIME AS ACTING PRIME MINISTER AND IS SEEN TO EXERT EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN THAT ROLE. IN FACT, WE WOULD JUDGE HIS CHANCES HAVE ALREADY INCREASED AS A RESULT OF HIS BEING INCLUDED WITH BEGIN AND DAYAN IN THE DISCUSSION WITH SADAT. AS NOTED ABOVE, DAYAN COULD RISE IF HE IS PERCEIVED TO PLAY A MAJOR ROLE IN REACHING, OR EVEN IN TRYING TO REACH, ACCOMMODATION WITH THE ARABS. ARENS COULD ALSO BECOME A MORE REALISTIC CANDIDATE THE LONGER THE ISSUE IS DEFERRED AND AS HIS POLITICAL STATURE GROWS; HE IS ALREADY IN THE PROCESS OF BECOMING BETTER KNOWN IN HIS ROLE AS CHAIRMAN AND HIS CHANCES WOULD BE ENHANCED IF HE WERE TO BECOME A MINISTER AND CARVE OUT A MEANINGFUL ROLE IN THE CABINET.

14. CLEARLY THE MAJOR DETERMINANT IN RESOLVING THE SUCCESSOR QUESTION WILL BE THE SITUATION AND THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF BEGIN'S DEPARTURE. IF HE WERE TO DISAPPEAR FROM THE SCENE SUDDENLY, WITHOUT HAVING NAMED A SUCCESSOR OR HAVING MADE HIS VIEWS KNOWN, THE UNSETTLED CONDITIONS WOULD PROBABLY FAVOR WEIZMAN AS THE MOST LIKELY CANDIDATE TO CARRY OUT A SMOOTH TRANSITION. IF, HOWEVER, AT THE POINT OF CHOICE, ISRAEL FOUND ITSELF IN CRITICAL NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE ARABS AND DAYAN WERE PERCEIVED TO BE PLAYING A CRUCIAL ROLE IN THOSE NEGOTIATIONS, HE WOULD BE HELPED. THE

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SUCCESS OR FAILURE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S NEW ECONOMIC PROGRAM MIGHT ALSO BE A FACTOR; FOR EXAMPLE, FAILURE MIGHT ENCOURAGE A TURN TO YADIN AS SOMEONE WHO HAS NOT BEEN CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH THE PROGRAM. IN PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO PREDICT WHETHER THERE WOULD BE A SMOOTH TRANSITION OR A TUMATIC REALIGNMENT OF POLITICAL FORCES SHOULD BEGIN DEPART FROM

THE SCENE; BUT THE LATTER POSSIBILITY CANNOT BE EXCLUDED.

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